Contact:
Ellis Smith
770-331-7191
esmith@chattanooga.gov

Chattanooga expands efforts to address homelessness

Having re-housed more than 1,800 residents, the city is enhancing partnerships with community groups and local businesses to address homelessness and the issues arising from homelessness

Chattanooga, Tenn. (Thursday, Oct. 20) — The City of Chattanooga is expanding efforts to address homelessness and its effects by enhancing partnerships with service providers and community stakeholders, in order to block entrances into homelessness, speed exits out of homelessness, and address impacts to the community.

"Our first task upon entering office was to begin the process of addressing the root causes of homelessness by creating and preserving thousands of units of affordable housing, and through the conversations and partnerships we've built along the way we've identified more granular solutions to the symptoms that confront our city," said Joda Thongnopnua, chief of staff for the City of Chattanooga. "And while we've made unprecedented progress — re-housing more than 1,800 residents since Mayor Kelly took office — we are confronted by an unprecedented housing crisis that demands an enhanced response."

"That's why, in consultation with CPD, community groups, housing providers, and local employers, we are moving to create a unified continuum of care for people experiencing homelessness, as well as enhance public safety in zones with elevated calls for service," continued Thongnopnua.

The city is now holding regular meetings with downtown stakeholders, alongside CPD representatives and Downtown Alliance workers, to more efficiently respond to residents who need assistance, and address illegal behavior from troublemakers.

CPD is adding bike, golf-cart and foot patrols to be able to provide more immediate assistance to residents, and the city is reopening public restrooms that were closed during the pandemic to allow individuals experiencing homelessness to use the bathroom indoors. The city is also temporarily removing several problem benches that created safety concerns because of links to panhandling, harassment and littering; once these effective measures are implemented, the Kelly administration will reinstall the benches.

Along with staffing and environmental changes, training is also being offered to front-line workers across the central business district, which will help them manage and refer crisis situations appropriately.

At the same time, the City has awarded $820,000 to the Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition to centralize and coordinate the patchwork of services available for residents experiencing homelessness, closing gaps and reducing overlap to address needs more efficiently through the use of enhanced data gathering and deployment. The Coalition will support the cold weather shelter at the Community Kitchen, and will help coordinate other efforts such as the city's work to construct a low-barrier shelter.

The city also continues to push forward on major initiatives that will address the root causes of homelessness by blocking entrances into homelessness, and speeding exits out of homelessness.

This includes work to erect permanent supportive housing at the former Airport Inn, leveraging national best practices that boast a 97 percent success rate. Once complete, the renovated complex will provide more than 70 units of housing for referred individuals who are ready to live semi-independently with wraparound services in a centralized location.

The city is also exploring partnerships with additive manufacturers and faith leaders in order to pilot the rapid creation of housing units that can be quickly erected on partner property on an as-needed basis.

Summary of Ongoing Efforts to Address the Unhoused

The city's approach to homelessness is informed by several factors. Chief among them is that the only durable solution to homelessness is a home. While co-occuring conditions such as mental illness and substance abuse must be addressed, these conditions are extremely difficult to treat when an individual is living in fear for their personal safety and/or the safety of their few possessions because they are unsheltered. Hence, housing the unhoused is the city's top priority.

Second, the city recognizes that there is no monolithic group of permanently homeless individuals; rather people are falling into homelessness and exiting homelessness on a daily basis for a variety of reasons. Chief among the reasons for an individual entering homeless is the rising cost of housing, combined with stagnant wages. And the reasons for exiting homelessness will always include a person moving into a home they can afford.

During the pandemic, the cost of housing skyrocketed, while wages rose modestly and were impacted by inflation. Those factors led to many housing-burdened individuals falling into homelessness, leading to large increases in the unsheltered population in Chattanooga and across the country, as the number of individuals experiencing homelessness locally rose 250 percent in the last year alone.

The city continues to work on a number of existing efforts to address homelessness, including:

- Mayor Kelly's $100 million affordable housing initiative:
  - Designed to create or preserve thousands of units of affordable housing across Chattanooga, this housing initiative will drive down the cost of living for residents, blocking exits into homelessness.

- Zoning overhaul:
  - By leveraging best practices to drive enhanced housing density in areas that can support additional residents, the city will create conditions for the market to create more housing choices, including more affordable housing.
- Eviction Prevention Initiative and Eviction Diversion Initiative:
  - By supporting these initiatives, individuals who are at risk of being evicted will receive the help they need to work with landlords and stay in their homes, preventing additional entrances into homelessness.
- Major housing initiatives through revitalization:
  - The Kelly administration is undertaking a number of public-private partnerships to revitalize blighted sections of the city through mixed-use infill redevelopment, which will build thousands of new homes, including both attainable and market rate housing, as part of about $5.5 billion in revitalization.
- Housing provider incentives:
  - The city has worked with housing providers to create incentives that allow repairs to take place without evicting residents, and which provide a safety net to housing providers who are willing to rent to those who are housing burdened. This led to the creation of the Housing Provider Alliance, with more than 150 members, who help provide and preserve affordable housing.
- Workforce training:
  - The administration has designated $4.4 million in federal funds toward local workforce development initiatives, and has also funded the Construction Academy, which will provide skills training to residents that will enable them to earn a living wage through in-demand careers.
- Community Forward:
  - The city has partnered with Hamilton County Schools to place navigators within schools that are inside the city limits, who can provide both students and their families with connections to needed resources. The city also has an MOU with Hamilton County schools to provide services to families of students who are unhoused.
- Temporary sanctioned encampment:
  - By making a temporary sanctioned encampment available with more than 100 available sites, including bathrooms and a fence, individuals are better able to problem solve and work in a centralized location with service providers, free from the day-to-day fear. Fifteen individuals from the temporary encampment have moved into permanent housing since it opened in June.

Of those who are homeless, the city looks at the length of time a person has been without a home when determining the most appropriate services to provide. Episodic homelessness lasts less than a year, while chronic homelessness lasts more than a year and typically includes one or more co-occuring conditions.

###